

# 10

## Handling Parents

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*The toughest thing kids have to face is the unfulfilled lives of their parents.*

—John W. Gardner

*T*he game was close. We were behind but battling back, and now trailed by a single run. Our batter hit a ball into left-center field. For a moment it looked like the center fielder had a chance to make the catch but he couldn't get to it. He did, however, dive vaguely in the direction of the ball. But then, instead of getting up and chasing after it, he rolled on the ground in agony. It wasn't clear whether it was physical pain or the emotional pain of seeing the ball get away from him that was the source of the disturbance.

Meanwhile our baserunners were chugging around the bases with the runs that would clinch our victory. But wait! The umpire, who happened to be the parent of a player on the other team (might he be the dad of the center fielder?), calls the play dead and sends the batter, who had already reached third, back to first base. The other two runners are also ordered to return to second and third so that no runners score on what looked to be at minimum a triple and more likely a home run.

One of my parents cannot contain himself at this injus-

## POSITIVE COACHING

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tice. He charges up to the umpire and complains strenuously about the unfairness of it all. "Even if the center fielder is hurt, you can't stop the play until it's over. You can't send the runners back. That's not fair. The center fielder is not in any danger from the play." The umpire, who was enlisted after much coaxing by the other team's manager when the "regular" umpire didn't show up, is not taking this outburst kindly. It may well be his first ever (and probably his last) experience as an umpire. "Well, then, *you* ump if you can do it so much better!" he grumps as he stomps away.

This brings forward a parent from the other team who is not merely defensive. He (a college professor) is ready to duke it out with my parent (an engineer) before the other manager and I get between them and calm things down.

What's wrong with this picture? The most amazing thing to me is that this is a tee-ball game between first- and second-grade children! That parents could become so out-of-control angry about a small-fry game still boggles my mind after seven years.

## THE SOURCES OF LITTLE LEAGUE PARENT-ITIS

More than almost any other factor, it is parents that give would-be coaches pause. I have only occasionally glimpsed the "Little League parent," but even one time is too many. It is an ugly picture. As kids get older, parents tend to become more belligerent, as if they acknowledge that it was okay to just have fun when the kids were young, but now that they are in seventh grade (or sixth, or fifth, or . . .) it's time to win.

In this chapter I discuss the sources of Little League parent-itis, how a coach can prevent it from getting out of hand, what parents need from a coach, and how a coach

can meet parental needs to ensure that the kids have a good experience free from the worst influence of overinvolved parents.

The sources of parental misbehavior are many. Part of it comes from a normal phenomenon of distorted perceptions. Some of it can be traced to a desire to relive lost (or never-were) days of glory through one's child, and some of it comes from a subconscious concern that other people judge one by how one's child behaves on the athletic field. To be fair, I should also add that there is almost always an element of true concern for the child, and it is this noble strand that is the coach's best ally in learning how to handle parents.

**1. Distorted perceptions:** It goes without saying that parents tend to think that the umpire, referee, linesman, etc. will make calls against their kids' team. It is clear that partisans at a sporting event tend to interpret referee calls in a biased manner. As a coach, you can defuse a lot of negative energy by calling into question the distorted perceptions of your players' parents.

During a soccer game that my son was in, many of the parents on our team became outraged by a call made by one of the referees. I volunteered that it looked to me like it was a good call. There was an almost audible release of tension as parents seemed to be reviewing the play in their heads, since someone who was "on their side" (me) called into question their perception.

Distortion of perceptions is not a disease that affects only other, "bad" people. I certainly am not immune. Any time that I badly want our team to win, I become susceptible to distorted perceptions. Recently my basketball team was being soundly trounced by a team that I really wanted to beat. One of the best players on the team passed up an easy lay-up to give the ball to another, weaker player. I became enraged at what I took to be an obvious insult to our team's ability. I said as much to

## POSITIVE COACHING

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Jim Nakasuji, my assistant coach, who challenged my perception. He pointed out to me that the other team, like ours, had some weaker players and the other coach had directed his better players to ease off (since they were way ahead) and give the weaker players chances to score. Jim pointed out that we did exactly the same thing when it was clear we were going to win.

In retrospect I see that my perceptions were wildly off base. But the heat of competition distorted my thinking. The lesson here is that this is *normal*. In a competitive sport when you're trying hard to win, it is absolutely normal and commonplace to experience distorted perceptions. It is normal, but it is also unhealthy and harmful to players to allow those distorted perceptions to go unchallenged. It is a sad and ugly thing to see parents and coaches act on distorted perceptions. Even worse is when players themselves begin to see the world through distorted perceptions. They tend to stop trying as hard, whine after every call that goes against them, and generally lose the degree of mental toughness they will need to succeed in sports and in life.

The person in the best position to deal effectively with distorted perceptions is you, the coach. How? Begin the season by telling parents some horror stories of Little League parents and coaches you've seen in the past. Make it clear to them that you don't want that to happen with your team and that you are confident it won't. Acknowledge to your parents that distorted perceptions are normal but you don't want them to get out of hand. You might even tell parents and your assistant coaches that you sometimes fall prey to distorted perceptions, and you'd like them to help you see when that is starting to happen.

Simply calling the phenomenon to their attention at the beginning of the season will go a long way toward keeping it from happening or at least from getting out of control.

2. **Reliving past glories:** Sports are one of the few ways left in this society that people have a chance to be a hero. Few of us get the chance at work to do something heroic. It is rare that we get a chance to use CPR even if we have learned it. But competitive sports are *set up* to offer heroic opportunities to people.

Some of us get the opportunity to be a sports hero, and occasionally we come through. I once hit three home runs in a Babe Ruth League game in Colfax, North Dakota, more than 30 years ago. I doubt that anyone else remembers it, but I still can see where each home run went (two down the right-field line and one over the left fielder's head). For a brief moment I was a hero—at the local swimming pool that next week, girls who had never talked to me before hovered around me.

My moments of sports glory have been quite few and modest. Many people haven't had any. In either case, there is the doomed hope that one can live again or for the first time that glorious glory through one's child. Of course if we verbalized it out loud to a friend or spouse, we would realize how out-of-touch with reality it is. But few people do verbalize it to themselves let alone anyone else. Sometimes we verbalize just a part of it. The stated part is: "Why can't Billy hit that slow moving pitch?" or "Why can't Janet make a simple lay-up?" The unstated part is: "I could do it."

What's missing here is the realization that Billy and Janet are children who are just learning the game while the "I" speaking is a grown adult who now probably does have the ability to hit a slow-moving pitch from a child or make a simple lay-up. It's not surprising that a 30-some-year-old adult could hit a pitch from a fifth-grader.

But we fail to put ourselves completely in the shoes of our children. When they are our age, most of them also will be able to hit a fifth-grader's pitching. The better comparison for us might be, "Could I hit Nolan

## POSITIVE COACHING

Ryan's pitching?" After all, Nolan Ryan is older than most Little League parents.

And, in fact, arranging situations where parents have to perform (and not just give directions to their children) can have a positive impact by giving parents a whole different way of looking at their child's performance.

I recently had a humbling experience that drilled home to me the usefulness of having parents go through the same experiences that their child athletes do. On the last day of our first Cupertino Hoops basketball season, we had a coaches game. As coaches, we had been yelling at our players all season to play the game correctly, and now we were giving the players the chance to yell at us.

After just a few minutes of running up and down the court I was dragging. It was then that a great insight hit me. I was running down the court after the other team had scored, with my back to my teammate who was bringing the ball up the floor. Now I have yelled innumerable times at my players to not turn their back on the ball when they run, but here I was doing it. The insight came in a flash: I wasn't looking for the ball because I was afraid someone would throw it to me. I was so tired that I didn't want to have to make the effort to catch the ball and then do something productive with it.

The lesson is clear: If possible, get parents into game-like situations where they cannot continue to fantasize unrealistically. Beyond that, I don't have any magic potion to keep parents from trying to relive past glories through their children. However, simply airing the subject with parents and getting it out of the closet will help defuse it. Regularly remind parents that the players are still learning the game. Share with them that it is sometimes difficult for you as a coach to remember that what seems easy for an adult is nonetheless diffi-

cult for a child. By getting the ghost of sports-glories-past out in the open, you will have gone a long way toward exorcising it.

3. **Believing "I am my child":** One of the difficulties of coaching your own child is the concern that others will judge you based on your child's actions, both in athletic performance and social behavior. Part of what drives parents to get overinvolved in trying to control their child's behavior around a sport is the belief that they are judged by others, as a parent and as a human being, according to how their child behaves.

One particularly unhappy situation occurred a few years ago with a baseball player whose father was on him *all* the time. The boy was a good ballplayer, but his father tried to direct his every move. He regularly yelled out instructions on where to position himself before each hitter. He gave him batting feedback without ever apparently stopping for breath. The results were not good. The player, who had the ability to be a terrific hitter, hit almost nothing. He typically tried to get a walk, and because he was short, he often did. But whenever he came up against a pitcher with good control, he was a sure out because he rarely swung.

In talking with his dad, it became clear that he took every move his son made as a personal threat to his own self-esteem. He expected perfection from his son. What he got was reduced performance from a young athlete with a lot of potential who was too busy resisting his father's control to be able to concentrate enough to hit the ball.

This isn't intended to be a happy talk book. I am not going to say that other people won't sometimes judge a parent by the behavior of their child on the athletic field. Sometimes people do think, when they see an athlete misbehave, whine, or throw a tantrum on the playing field, "Where did her parents go wrong?"

But there is lots of evidence that most parents are

## POSITIVE COACHING

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too self-consumed worrying about what other people are thinking about them and *their* child to spend much time examining the behavior of other people's kids.

As a coach you can help take the pressure off parents who confuse the identity of their child with their own by making it clear that *you* don't judge them on that basis. You can say to them early and often that the player's behavior in practice and games is the joint responsibility of the player and you, the coach. If there are problems which you don't anticipate, you may call on the parent for help, but you don't expect their kids to be perfect. And they don't need to apologize for, or feel bad about, how their kids perform.

Acknowledging that you know they might tend to feel responsible for their child's behavior but that you won't blame them should go a long way toward defusing this problem.

## WHAT PARENTS WANT FROM A COACH

Parents want to be reassured that they have done right by their child. They want to be able to believe that they are doing a good job as a parent. They, like their children, want to feel a part of a successful team. As a coach you probably don't want to get involved with parents at the level of a psychotherapist. But there are some simple things that you can do to help your players' parents become constructive forces for the team. Here's my short list of what parents want from a coach.

1. **To be in the information loop:** Tell parents when practices are going to be. Tell them when practices are going to end. Try to end practices when you say they will end. In the part of the world where I live, people's lives are already complex and overscheduled. Make it easier

for them by giving them a realistic notion of when practices will end and then end them on time.

Tell them about the season. Give them as much advance information about games as possible. Tell them when the season ends, whether there will be playoffs, and whether there is an all-star game. As a first-time baseball coach I was surprised at all the hoopla at the end of the season, with the tournament of champions and the all-star tournament. After I had coached for a few years, I began to assume that parents and players knew all about them. In one case, one of my best players was unable to play in the all-star tournament because his family had planned a trip to Japan at that time. They had planned the trip for the end of the baseball season and I hadn't bothered to tell them that their son was a likely all-star and how long the all-star tournament was likely to go.

2. **To hear good things about their kids:** Tell parents good things about their children. Don't make up false things, but find some area where a player is making improvement or effort and share that with his parents. I try to speak to each parent at least once before, during, or after every practice and talk about what Julio or Kristi is working on and how it's going. Parents want to know that their children aren't going to grow up to be criminals or bums. You can reassure them that at least in this one area, sports, their kids are upright citizens who are trying hard and making progress.
3. **To see their kids play:** Play each child as much as you can. Parents want to see their kids play. Many sports programs for younger kids have a minimum playing time rule. However, many coaches treat such a rule as a ceiling on playing time for weaker players rather than a minimum that can be exceeded. Even in games that are won in the first inning, coaches will play the weaker players only the required minimum number of innings. As the kids get older and the importance of winning in-

## POSITIVE COACHING

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creases, the playing time rules tend to drop away. And the weaker players play even less. I am amazed at how conservative coaches are about playing weaker players.

I have seen many, many situations where a coach has passed up an opportunity for a weaker player to participate in a game that is already won or lost. If you look for the chance to play your weaker players more often, you will find situations where you can do it without hurting the chances of your team.

4. **To be included—to also be “among friends”:** Chapter 5 describes ways that you can build self-esteem by helping your players to feel they are “among friends.” Most of the ways that you build self-esteem among players will work just as well for parents. Adults appreciate it when the coach learns their names, jokes with them, expresses appreciation to them, etc. And they, in turn, will want you to succeed and be willing to help you.

## HOW PARENTS CAN HELP YOU

Parents, when properly dealt with and appreciated, can become a potent force to reinforce the messages you are trying to send to your players. And in some cases, positive parental involvement can even help your team win more games.

When my son was playing soccer several years ago, I had a bad attitude about it. I didn't realize it at the time but I was tired of sports. The baseball season had ended after seeming to go on forever. Soccer practices were beginning two months before the season started. The soccer coaches wanted to go to a tournament every weekend, including one that was an overnight trip several hundred miles away. The soccer season was going to extend well into January or February, which was basketball season, my favorite sport. I was burned out on long sports seasons (and soccer, in particular), and I didn't try to hide it from anyone, including my son.

I don't believe that it was a coincidence that he began to play poorly. Unlike before, he rarely kicked the soccer ball around, outside of practice. He became unenthusiastic about practices and even games. And his play suffered.

It wasn't until sometime later that I concluded that my constant complaining and lack of enthusiasm about soccer was contributing to his halfhearted efforts. The next soccer season I made a point to be upbeat about soccer, and he rebounded with his usual enthusiastic play. My being a sourpuss about soccer made it harder for him to feel good about the amount of effort it takes to play a sport.

The lesson here for a coach who wants his players to be enthusiastic and positive about the team and the sport is to recognize the impact parents can have on a player's attitude and effort level. I recommend discussing this impact with parents at the beginning of the season and encouraging them to be visibly upbeat about the season with their child.

Then try to get them to agree to help you create a terrific experience for the players on the team by following these guidelines for a coach-parent partnership.

### **GUIDELINES FOR A COACH-PARENT PARTNERSHIP**

While you will not always be able to get parents to be active forces to help you get your messages across to the players, if you can give them some concrete guidelines about how they can help, you are more likely to forge a potent coach-parent partnership that will benefit everyone. Here are my guidelines.

- 1. Don't put the player in the middle:** It is common for parents to disagree with the coaches of their youngsters. Even when a disagreement doesn't surface to the coach, it can result in parents complaining to their child about the coach's strategies or policies. Talk with par-

## POSITIVE COACHING

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ents at the beginning of the season and ask them to talk directly with you if they have a problem about the way you are running the team. If they think, for example, that their child is not playing enough or is playing the wrong position, or whatever, they should come to you and discuss it. If parents are openly and repeatedly invited to talk with you about problems they have, they are less likely to complain in front of their child.

- 2. Give you feedback:** This may seem like a repeat of the first point, but it is important enough to single out as a separate item. If you tell parents that you want them to talk to you about what's bothering them and/or their child, they will do so. Not only will they come to you, they will be less likely to complain to their child, or to gossip behind your back with other parents about all the horrible coaching moves you are making. They may even be astonished, since in my experience, the norm is certainly not for coaches to encourage parents to tell them when there's a problem.

Also encourage them to tell you when something is bothering their child, such as a physical ailment like a cold or the flu, a death in the family, or problems in school that might affect their behavior in practice or a game.

One year I had a player on my baseball team who was very hard of hearing. It wasn't until late in the year that another parent who knew the kid in question asked me about how I was handling Jake's hearing loss. I felt like a total dunderhead when, before I could stop my mouth from letting it out, I said, "What hearing loss?" It was all clear to me then, all of the times I had gotten so frustrated with Jake because he seemed to be purposely disregarding my instructions. Many's the time I had to restrain myself from yelling, "Are you deaf?!"

You can only benefit from encouraging your parents to engage in full disclosure about your players.

- 3. Don't give instructions during a game:** When I coach I

often have individual players working on specific things that may not be apparent to observers, even parents. It drives me up the wall to have parents yelling instructions to their kids during a game. One basketball game we were playing a one-player team. The entire offense revolved around one very quick point guard who had failed to demonstrate that she had an effective outside shot. The other team's single play seemed to be to set multiple picks for their point guard and let her drive to the basket. I asked my point guard to drop way off and dare her to shoot from the outside. By dropping off, my player could also more easily avoid the picks and keep her from getting the lay-up. Our plan was working splendidly when one of our parents began yelling to our point guard to "get out on her." Fortunately, our player ignored the directions, I explained our strategy to the parent, and all was well. But too often, players are put in the no-win situation of trying to please both the coach and the parent. It is difficult for the player to resolve this situation and that means the coach needs to deal with it.

I ask parents to tell me if they have a suggestion to improve their (or another) child's play, so that I can tell the player, if appropriate. That way, the player won't be confused by conflicting instructions. Even if the parent's suggestion is a useful one, it may not be helpful to the player to have the parent yelling it out in the middle of a game.

4. **Provide positive support for their player:** Perhaps the most important thing a parent can do is to be there for the athlete. Competitive sports are stressful to players and the last thing they need is a critic at home. Be clear with your parents that you want them to be a cheerleader for their kids. You want them to focus on the positive things their child is doing and leave the correcting of mistakes to you.
5. **Be part of the "home court advantage" for the team:** In

Chapter 14 I discuss how to create a home court advantage for your team. Parents can be an important part of this atmosphere. Ask them explicitly to help create a home court advantage. Tell them why the home court advantage works and that you want their help in making it work for your team. Once they understand the concept, they will likely become enthusiastic and relentlessly positive forces from the sidelines.

6. **Don't disparage the other team:** I want to win but I don't want to win at the expense of diminishing the players and coaches on opposing teams. I once observed a baseball coach who pretended to shout encouragement to his players while really trying to discourage the opposing players. He would yell to his pitcher things like, "Just throw strikes. This guy hasn't gotten a hit all season."

I want my team to win by playing their best and beating the best that the other team has to offer. Winning by demoralizing the other team's players is not for me. I ask my parents (and players) to be careful to avoid inadvertently saying things that have a demoralizing effect.

## PARENTS AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Another area where positive parental involvement can be effective is in keeping kids involved when the going gets tough. In particular I have seen situations around all-star teams where parents could have made a huge difference.

All-star teams bring out the absolute worst in parents. Players who have been the stars of their individual teams now have to jockey with other stars and only one or two of them can play shortstop. To go from playing shortstop to right field, or even worse, to sitting on the bench most of the time, is difficult enough for the players. And since the minimum playing time rule often no longer applies

during an all-star tournament, many players who played all game every game all season long now find themselves watching most of the game from the bench. When the parents also express a lot of resentment, it is a rare child who can make the best of the situation.

In several all-star situations, parents have pulled their kids off the all-star team because they felt they weren't getting enough playing time, or that their "natural first baseman" (i.e., he is left-handed) wasn't getting to play first base. One tragic situation I observed up close occurred during the middle of a hard-fought all-star tournament game. Our team had already lost one game in a double elimination tournament, and we were narrowly hanging on to a lead largely because of a great effort by our best pitcher.

The parent of a child—one who had played first base all year but who now was mostly sitting on the bench—challenged the manager in the middle of the game when the boy playing first base made an error. He got into a shouting match with the manager, which upset the manager and coaches and probably some of the players as well, since the parent was not taking pains to keep his voice down. The parent eventually stomped off back to the bleachers, the game resumed, and we eked out a narrow victory to keep our hopes alive in the loser's bracket of the tournament.

The irony here is that although the manager was irate at the parent, he was influenced by his criticism. The next game happened to be against a much weaker team, and he told me he planned on starting the irate parent's son at first base for that game. Alas, it never came to be because the parent yanked his son off the team. The next game was an easy victory, with all the players getting to play a significant amount of the game. Some of the players who hadn't played before in the tournament went on to make great fielding plays and get hits.

I still feel badly about the dilemma the yanked player

## POSITIVE COACHING

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was put in. It would have been hard for him to come out ahead. If he got to start after his father's tantrum, he might well think that was the only reason. He could well imagine his father expecting him to do especially well since this was his big chance to show the manager that his father was right. With that kind of pressure, it wouldn't have been surprising if he would have had a bad outing. And it is a rare event when you come up against a weaker team the further you go in an all-star tournament, as we did in this case. As you keep playing, you face better and better teams, so even your superstar players begin to falter. The cards were stacked against the child by the father's action, and it didn't have to be that way.

The parent might have used the situation to help the player become mentally tougher. He might have said something like, "It must be frustrating for you to have to sit on the bench, especially if you believe you can do a better job than the kid playing first base. But you're going to face many situations like this in life, and I encourage you to continue to work hard in practice and show the coach that you're ready to go in and make a difference when you get the chance. If you really work hard in practice, you may get that opportunity. So hang in there." He might have gone the whole nine yards and added, "In the meantime, you can help your team from the bench by volunteering to coach the bases, warm up the outfielders, and cheer for your teammates."

The father also might have gone to the manager privately and talked diplomatically about the situation. For example, he might have said something like, "Hector is a little frustrated by not getting to play and it seemed to me that he might be able to help your lineup defensively at first base. You know he played first base all year with his regular team. Is there something he can do to get a chance to play more?" It is a rare manager who won't listen to a parent who approaches in the right manner. And in this case, I think the manager would have responded by giving

him more playing time in a way that would not have increased the pressure on the boy

By the way, it wasn't at all clear to me that *Hector* was itching for more playing time. He may well have been content to not play that much given the high quality of the competition. Nonetheless, either of these approaches would have supported the player and made it easier for him to deal with the situation rather than put him into a no-win bind.

#### WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS— INTERVENING WITH A PARENT

Most of the time the suggestions in this chapter have worked for me. When people in organizations get clear signals about the kind of behavior that is expected of them, they usually try to comply if they have the ability. When parents get clear signals of what your program of parental involvement is and isn't, when they are clued into the sources of Little League parent-itis, when they hear lots of good stuff about their children from the coach, when their kids get to play a lot and are progressing and having fun, they tend to go along with the program.

But sometimes, your best efforts aren't enough. Then the parent who apparently hasn't read or heard your repeated statement of parental guidelines comes along. Or worse, the parent has read them but ignores them. He yells out instructions during games. She focuses on her child's mistakes and won't let them go. He dresses down the player in front of others. She just generally gets in the way of the player having fun and learning the sport.

In this situation there's no alternative to intervention because that's part of the responsibility of a coach who is serious about developing his players as athletes and people. So, go ahead and do it. Take the parent aside, away from everyone else, and, in as matter-of-fact a way as pos-

## POSITIVE COACHING

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sible, tell him what you observe him doing and what the negative consequences for the player and the team are. Ask him to refrain from doing it.

A key to handling this successfully is to not make it seem like a big thing. This may be difficult if it has started to annoy you and you've let it go on longer than you feel you should have. But if you can handle it in a straightforward way, your chances of the parent going along will be greatly enhanced.

The other essential element is to focus on the behavior that you observe and why it's a problem. For example, you might say, "I've noticed that you often yell out instructions to Paul during a game. We both know that Paul sometimes forgets to back up throws to the bases and to think about where to play each hitter, but I am trying to get Paul to concentrate on thinking for himself and remembering to do those things. When you yell instructions to him, it makes it harder for him to learn to think through these decisions on his own. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't yell instructions any more. Okay?"

I've said elsewhere in this book (see Chapter 2) that it is easier to confront someone with the need to change their behavior when you have created an atmosphere of positivity in which they feel accepted and able to make mistakes without censure. If you have done this, the likelihood of even needing to intervene with parents will be dramatically reduced. And if you do need to intervene, the parent will be much more likely to respond positively to you when you do.

## THE NOBLE STRAND

I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that in addition to distorted perceptions, a desire to relive past glories, and a belief that the parent is the child, there was a noble strand of concern that every parent has for their child. Most parents want their kids to do well because they love

them. If this noble strand is not readily apparent—and with some parents it may not be—it still is down there somewhere ready to be drawn out into the open by how you interact with the parents.

It's not necessarily easy, but I am convinced that by following these suggestions for dealing with parents you will be able to tap into the noble strand with each parent you run across. And it's worth the effort.